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Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 9: 36 – 43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7: 9 – 17

John 10: 22 – 30

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**The Lord is my shepherd.**

My first association with the twenty-third psalm was around grade school, when I discovered it on a marker in my mother's Bible. It was on a little card from her father's funeral service which had been a number of years before I was born. Ever since, I have almost always associated the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm with death and funerals, and it is often used that way. For a long time, the images it created in my mind's eye, and perhaps yours as well, were of green, rolling pastures dotted with fluffy sheep and lambs, all watched over by a loving, gentle, caring shepherd. Bucolic. Serene. Reassuring. Safe. But in the Bible, a shepherd and his or her flock was not always so bucolic or serene. Or safe.

In the Bible, theologian Walter Brueggeman [*The Threat of Life*] writes, the figure of 'shepherd' is political. It means sovereign, lord, king, authority. The one to whom I owe all of my allegiance and to whom I am accountable. The one I trust and serve. So to say that the Lord is my shepherd is to make a very political statement about the center and purpose of my life. To say that the Lord is my shepherd is to say that my goal, my focus is Yahweh and only Yahweh.

It is an entirely unambiguous statement. Brueggemann notes that to make such a proclamation means that there can be 'no competing claims or loyalties – not economic or political, not liberal or conservative, not sexist or racist, not any other petty loyalties that seduce us.' Brueggeman calls it a mark of discernment, of spiritual maturity, to be able to 'strip life down to one compelling loyalty, to be freed of all the others that turn out to be idolatrous.' So in today's Gospel lesson, when Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd again, the one whose sheep know his voice, he is making a claim for loyalty, for authority and for kingship.

There is a backstory for today's Gospel reading, as there almost always is. At the beginning of this passage, the evangelist, John, notes that it is at 'the time of the festival of the Dedication in Jerusalem.' Which tells us two things: it is winter, and Jesus is in Jerusalem. More specifically, it is the winter a few short months before Jesus' final Passover, and time is getting short.

The festival of the Dedication goes back almost exactly two hundred years before today's encounter between Jesus and his adversaries. It was in the year 167 BC by our reckoning, and it was the third winter after the disaster. Antiochus Epiphanes and his troops had conquered Jerusalem, trampling the city and its people, killing many of them and capturing more. Many people had begun to lose hope that God's favor would ever return to them. As almost always happens, some people had collaborated with the enemy, hoping that things would go better for them if the occupation was a long one. But for the most part, people were still struggling to get used to their present situation. Especially the destruction of their massive, beautiful Temple.

The Temple was the house of Yahweh – the God of Israel, the God of the world, the God of all creation. And now that very Temple was being desecrated and polluted by these foreigners who were worshipping their own gods where once sacrifices had been offered only to Yahweh. Trouble fomented just under the surface until, under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus, the people of God revolted, routing the enemy in a spectacular victory and liberating their city.

Three years to the day of the desecration of the Temple, there was a purification ceremony of rededication, with the *proper* sacrifices being offered to the *proper* God. The people of Israel beseeched God to never let such a thing happen to them again. It was decreed that every year, on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev (approximately our December), there would be a festival to commemorate the occasion. It was called Hanukkah, or ‘dedication.’

For his incredible bravery and faithfulness to Yahweh, Judas Maccabaeus was made king. After all, to liberate the Temple and return it to the worship of Yahweh was just about as good as everything David and Solomon had done. And so Judas began a dynasty that reigned about a hundred years until the Romans came. The Romans put Herod the Great as a puppet-king on the throne instead. Herod, in order to look like he was carrying on in the Maccabean footsteps and to look like he was one of the Jewish people, married a princess from the Maccabees. But it didn’t really fool anyone.

So it was no wonder that, down through the years, whenever the Jewish people celebrated the feast of Dedication, they thought about kingship and liberation, and of course about Yahweh. And then comes Jesus, in the bleak midwinter, strolling on the protected east portico of the Temple. He doesn’t talk about kings directly. Instead, Jesus talks about shepherds and sheep, faithfulness and loyalty, and about wolves in sheep’s clothing. But really, how could anyone NOT hear this as seditious, or at least very pointed, very dangerous remarks?

Jesus’ comments are not about green pastures dotted with fluffy sheep and lambs; they are about power and authority – God’s power and God’s authority. They are about the Kingdom of God versus the kingdoms of this world. As one writer [Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*] puts it, ‘there is nothing lyrical about Jesus’ image of the Good Shepherd. [Jesus’] guardian of the flock is, rather, a virile and militant figure, the incarnation of a compassion not of this world, and shadowed by the nearness of death.’

Jesus’ remarks are so inflammatory that, in the next verse, his listeners pick up stones in order to stone him. As John Chrysostom put it, Jesus’ enemies aren’t disbelieving because they know that Jesus isn’t really a shepherd; they are disbelieving because they are not sheep of his flock; they do not know his voice.

Jesus’ talk about sheep and shepherds comes, of course, in response to his adversaries’ irritating need for definition, “tell us plainly, are you the Messiah or not?” So even though the woman at the well and Martha of Bethany have already referred to Jesus as the Messiah in this Gospel of John’s, Jesus has never actually claimed that title. Nor does he now. Because he knows what people have in mind as a

messiah, and Jesus knows that he is so much more than that. “Messiah,” is a word that, as we would say, has a lot of baggage for the people of Israel. It is a title replete with distorted images and expectations for the people of God, and Jesus cannot own it without creating false hopes, this-world-based hopes. “Messiah” is nowhere near adequate to describe who Jesus is and what he is doing.

By calling God “Father,” Jesus begins to move his audience towards the notion of “Son of God,” which is what the next part of the conversation will be about. The crucial thing in what Jesus says is his claim that he and the Father are one, by which he means that he and God do the same work. “The works I do in my Father’s name testify to me,” Jesus says. In other words, the proof is in the pudding. Jesus’ identity should be obvious in the healing, reconciling work that he is doing. Jesus doesn’t bother to draw a clear line between his words and his works, but rather that all that he is and all that he does and all that he says reveal God at work in the world.

When Jesus says that he and the Father are one, we 21<sup>st</sup> century people have to hear this in the context, the theology, of John the evangelist. We need to be careful that we don’t read into it all of the theological controversies of the third and fourth centuries and beyond – the time from which we get the Nicene and Apostles Creeds which try to nail down, so to speak, the nature of Jesus and the idea of the Trinity. The Greek word here for ‘one’ is *εν* (hen), which is a neuter rather than masculine word. Jesus is not speaking in metaphysical terms of person or nature or substance, rather Jesus speaks of ‘one’ in terms of unity. Jesus and God are united in the work that they do. It is impossible to distinguish between the work that Jesus does and the work that God does in the world, because Jesus shares fully in it. It is what Jesus has really been saying all along in John, but in response to his adversaries’ request, he now says it plainly.

Jesus is much more than what people have been hoping for in a messiah. He is not a political liberator or a military conquering hero who will end the occupation of Israel by foreign enemies forever. In the Gospel of John, Jesus never claims to be a second God or a ‘new and improved’ God or a replacement for God. Instead, Jesus claims to know God in a way that no human has ever known God. Jesus claims to be one with God in will and in work for the purpose of redeeming the world. Jesus becomes the very power of God loose in the world. It is the power over sin, death and judgment. It is the power of true life.

It is this relationship between Jesus and God that the sheep of Jesus’ flock will understand. And it is this relationship that demonstrates God’s radical love for the world. In the mystery of the incarnation, God made flesh, God becomes tangibly, palpably available to humanity in the person of Jesus. For John, those who believe this about Jesus, who see the works of God in Jesus’s life and ministry, have access to God in a way never before possible. We have eternal life. The Lord *is* our Shepherd. And we are the people of his pasture. *That* is John’s Good News for us. +